

## REFUGE STATION AT OR NEAR POINT BARROW, ALASKA.

JANUARY 15, 1889.—Committed to the Committee of the Whole House on the state of the Union and ordered to be printed.

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Mr. DAVIS, from the Committee on Commerce, submitted the following

### REPORT:

[To accompany bill H. R. 12215.]

The Committee on Commerce, to whom was referred House bill 11852 to establish two refuge stations on the coast of the Arctic Ocean, and House bill 12011 for the establishment of refuge stations at or near Point Barrow, Alaska, at or near Point Hope, Alaska, and at or near East Cape, Siberia, have had the same under consideration and beg leave to report a substitute therefor, establishing one refuge station at or near Point Barrow, Alaska, and making an appropriation for its construction and equipment.

With reference to the proposed establishment of stations of refuge at suitable points on the coast of Alaska bordering on the Arctic Ocean there seems to be a unanimous concurrence of opinion as to the necessity for immediate action on the part of Congress. The whaling industry of the United States, representing a capital of over \$2,000,000. and furnishing employment to from twelve to fifteen hundred seamen annually, is carried on in the waters of the Arctic Ocean under difficulties of navigation which are magnified by the unknown character of the region, and menated by dangers which are increased a hundredfold by the remoteness and isolation of the scene of its labors.

From statistics gathered from the most authentic sources it appears that no less than 76 whaling vessels have been lost in the Arctic Ocean during the period from 1868 to 1888, or an average of nearly 4 vessels per year. The greatest number of ships employed in whaling during this period was 53 and the least number 16. The average number of vessels employed annually was 32.7, and the percentage of losses was 12.2 per cent.

From testimony of ship-masters who have suffered disaster in the Arctic Ocean it appears that the ordinary resources of the sailor, such as escape by small boats to the shore and communication with settlements, is of no avail in these uninhabited and desolate regions. If by extraordinary exertions they succeed in reaching land, it has never happened that they have been able to transport sufficient food over the rough ice floes to last them any length of time, and the desolate character of the country, trackless and almost entirely devoid of game, would make the building of houses and the procuring of food for a long sojourn simply impossible.

The natives of Alaska in this region, while being friendly, are few in number, and could not be depended upon to furnish succor to even a small number of shipwrecked seamen.

In the cases of disaster to vessels of the whaling fleet, where assistance has been rendered and the lives of the crews saved, it has been during the summer season while the revenue cutter, which is annually dispatched to these waters, was in the field. The wonderful record of Captain Healy, of the United States revenue-marine, in rescuing and bringing back to the United States over three hundred and fifty seamen is a glorious tribute to the energy and indomitable courage of that officer and the efficiency of our revenue-marine service. But human endeavor has its limits. When the sea is frozen over no power on earth can reach shipwrecked vessels to render assistance. We only help them, and the only chance of sustaining life through the long winter and until the succeeding year's open water affords a passage for relief vessels is to find some shelter on shore.

From the experience of ship masters and the recommendations of Government officers well acquainted with Arctic matters, it appears necessary that stations of refuge, suitably equipped and furnished with clothing and food for the subsistence of at least one hundred men for nine months, should be established.

Point Barrow, or its immediate vicinity, is the unanimous choice of all those interested in this movement for the site of one of these stations.

A careful estimate of the cost of these stations of refuge has been made and the result is given below. It is believed that with the exception of a small annual appropriation to defray the expense attaching to the employment of a guard of not more than four men at each station, no additional funds will be necessary for at least five years unless the stations are occupied in the mean time and the supplies used by shipwrecked people.

The owners of whaling ships guaranty to furnish transportation free for all materials and supplies for these stations from San Francisco to the sites selected for the buildings.

It is not proposed in establishing stations of refuge to supersede the employment of Government vessels in the work of relief of the whaling fleet during the summer season. But it is intended, on the contrary, to render more efficient this invaluable service by supplying means whose necessity has long been felt by which seamen wrecked early in the season could be placed on shore and sustained until the time for the departure of the protecting vessels from the Arctic had arrived. In the absence of such places of refuge the *Bear* this year was compelled to leave the Arctic a month earlier than usual in order to bring back one hundred and six seamen who had been rescued from four vessels shipwrecked at Point Barrow early in August.

In connection with this subject of relief it is of interest to note the case of the bark *Ohio*, of New Bedford, which, with a crew of thirty-five men, is at present missing, and was last seen near Cape Lisburne in the Arctic Ocean, and has doubtless been wrecked in that vicinity. If any of her people escaped they are on shore, utterly helpless and beyond the reach of assistance until spring. It is earnestly hoped that steps shall be taken at once to put the United States revenue cutter *Bear* in commission as early in the season as possible, and to dispatch her north in search of this crew of shipwrecked and probably starving seamen.

#### COST OF STATIONS.

Building and furniture .....	\$5, 000
Food and clothing for 100 men and care for nine months .....	10, 000
Total for each station .....	15, 000

In response to a resolution of Hon. W. W. Morrow, of California, requesting information in regard to the wreck of whaling vessels in the Arctic Ocean, the Secretary of the Treasury transmitted to the Speaker of the House of Representatives a letter containing a statement in regard to the dangers and losses incurred by whaling vessels in the Arctic Ocean, and suggesting means of rescue.

Your committee beg also to append the following letter of Mr. John Murdock, librarian of the Smithsonian Institution, to Hon. S. S. Cox, as giving some interesting data on the subject under consideration:

JANUARY 5, 1889.

DEAR SIR: Mr. W. V. Cox informs me that you are desirous of obtaining all possible information in regard to the desirability of establishing a life-saving station at Point Barrow, Alaska. I spent nearly two years at Point Barrow, or rather at Cape Smyth, 11 miles southwest of the point, as one of the naturalists of the international polar expedition under Lieutenant Ray. My experience leads me to believe that the establishment of such a station, or rather house of refuge, which is, I believe, what is proposed, is a matter of the utmost importance to the safety of our brave whalers. The ordinary life-saving apparatus would be of little or no use, as the wrecks are generally caused by the ice and there is seldom much difficulty in reaching the shore. A shipwrecked crew once landed, however, would have great difficulty in keeping alive, especially if the wreck occurred late in the season, so that they would be obliged to winter. The country is perfectly barren, fuel, which consists entirely of driftwood, is very scarce, and food is very hard to procure. The natives live entirely by hunting and fishing, and are frequently hard pressed for food. Though they are well disposed towards the white men and exceedingly hospitable, their resources are so meager that a crew obliged to abandon their vessel in haste would be able to place no dependence on obtaining supplies from them.

Hardly a season passes that one or more wrecks do not occur in the immediate neighborhood of the point. Vessels can seldom penetrate into the ice pack more than a short distance to the east and north of the point. A large number of ships press on as rapidly as the season will permit and get to Point Barrow from the middle of July to the 1st of August, in the hope of catching up with the stragglers of the great spring migrations of whales to the northeast. Such vessels, especially in the days of steam whalers, run the risk of pushing ahead too fast, so that they are caught and crushed by the closing up of the "leads" in the ice pack. Such was the fate of the steam whaler *North Star*, Capt. L. C. Owen, in 1882. Captain Owen, who had the additional incentive of wishing to communicate with our party, who had been cut off from the civilized world since September, 1881, pushed on through a narrow "lead" and reached a point opposite our station at the extraordinarily early date of June 25.

Here the ship was caught in the ice and remained beset until July 8, when she was "nipped" and crushed so suddenly that the crew had barely time to save their personal effects and a little flour and hard bread. These, with two whale-boats and a small walrus dinghy, they had to drag across the rough ice for 6 or 7 miles before they reached the land, and the whale-boats were so battered by the journey that they were rendered unseaworthy. Had not Lieutenant Ray been able to issue rations and provide shelter for this crew of fifty men, their situation would have been one of extreme discomfort, if not of danger, as it was ten days before the sea opened for the rest of the fleet to come to their assistance. Most of the Eskimos, at that time of the year, were away from the villages on their summer hunting and trading expeditions, and there was very little food to be had. In 1881 the bark *Daniel Webster* was beset in the ice in the neighborhood of Icy Cape, and, drifting to the northeast, was crushed off Point Barrow. Her crew suffered considerable hardship after reaching the shore, and finally made their way with difficulty back to the other ships. A house of refuge could have enabled them to remain at the point until the sea opened. After the sea has opened the ships rendezvous at Point Barrow, waiting for the whales to return on their autumn migration. The more enterprising captains venture round the point, because the nearer the ship is to the edge of the ice when the whales begin to come out, the better are her prospects of a good catch. This exposes them to the danger of being caught by the ice closing in upon the end of the point. Finally, the vessels always stay as late in the fall as possible, for that is the season when the whales are coming out. This season is always stormy, and the danger from the ice is greatly increased. The shore is low and sandy, with shoal water extending a long way off, and there is not a harbor on the whole coast from Point Hope to Point Barrow. Small vessels might take shelter in Port Moore, just inside of the spit at Point Barrow, but the entrance is narrow, shoal, and intricate.

The most desirable point for the establishment of the house of refuge would be the site of the International Polar Station at Cape Smyth. The buildings, which are the

property of the United States, though they have since been occupied for several seasons by the Pacific Steam Whaling Company, are, I understand, still in good condition, and could be utilized for the purpose at small expense.

The men who would be needed to take charge of the house could occupy and partly support themselves by hunting and fishing, and might also be employed in making meteorological observations, a long series of which in that high latitude would add materially to our knowledge of the laws of the weather. Such a permanent station would enable the Government to carry on ethnological and other scientific investigations when desired. At the same time a party of the right sort of men stationed there would be able to aid materially in civilizing the Eskimos, who, in my opinion, are fully as capable and worthy of civilization as their cousins in Greenland, who have made such advances under the Danish rule. Moreover, such a station would be a convenient headquarters for the agents who are to make the enumeration of the northwestern natives for the next census and succeeding ones. Such an enumeration must necessarily be made in the winter, for then only are the natives settled in their permanent villages. The last census of this region is utterly unreliable from the fact that it is based on hasty enumerations made during the summer season, when the natives are living in temporary camps and traveling about from place to place.

Permanent villages, occupied only in winter, have been wholly omitted, and temporary summer camps, where there may be twenty people one year and none the next, have been put down as permanent towns.

I hope most sincerely that the matter will receive favorable consideration from Congress as speedily as possible.

Very respectfully, your obedient servant,

JOHN MURDOCH,  
*Librarian, Smithsonian Institution.*

Hon. S. S. Cox,  
*House of Representatives.*

As mentioned above, the persons interested in the establishment of these stations, and captains of whaling vessels who are familiar with the region where it is proposed to establish them, are unanimous as to the selection of Point Barrow as the most important site for a station, most of the wrecks occurring in that vicinity.

Your committee, recognizing the value of this suggestion, has thought proper to report for the two bills presented on the subject a substitute which provides for the construction and full equipment of the station at Point Barrow, and recommends its passage. Let us extend, as far as lies in our power, the succor granted everywhere on our coast to our merchant marine to a hitherto unprotected part of that same marine which, amidst dangers far greater than those incurred by our vessels in the Atlantic and Pacific Oceans and on the Lakes, pursues its perilous occupation, and carries our flag in the Arctic Ocean, in the frozen regions of our extreme northern boundary.